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there are winners and losers: 'wokery' and racial inequality in UK higher education

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This article discusses how initiatives to tackle racial inequality in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom (UK) have been viewed as 'wokery', a challenge to academic freedoms and free speech at universities, or a step too far towards 'political correctness'. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that racial inequality continues to pervade HE. Despite shortcomings in their implementation, equality frameworks and action plans offer universities a supplementary structure to shape and maintain their diversity and inclusion initiatives, without which the sector would be retracting on its commitment to diversify its structures and be more inclusive. Yet, there are concerns that such frameworks are little more than a manoeuvre for indoctrination and censorship, engineering the corporate view of HE. The question this paper considers is: Should efforts to tackle racial inequality in UK HE be viewed as expressions of 'wokery', and therefore as signs of excessive sensitivity, or as legitimate attempts to address a real problem?

Keywords: diversity, inclusivity, race equality charter, racially minoritised, wokery

Introduction

To deliberate on issues of racial inequality in the higher education (HE) sector may seem foolhardy in the light of recent controversies around 'wokery' in universities across the United Kingdom (UK) and the introduction of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, placing requirements on universities and student unions to protect freedom of speech. In the new millennia, we saw how the state exerted universities under considerable pressure to tackle race inequality: first, to promote diversity and equality in the student demographic; and second, to promote equality of opportunity for staff. Yet, by the mid-2010s, the salience of race equality seemed to be in decline, sliding off the UK government's agenda (Pilkington, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic years from 2020 to 2022, a resurgence of concerns addressing racial inequality returned to the forefront, under the guise of what some would badge as 'wokism'. In the 2020s, we seem to have reached a hiatus where universities have re-engaged with tackling racial inequality; but this has given rise to the accusation of universities being the seedbed of wokery – rife with guilt-stricken students and academics looking into undoing the wrong-doings of a generation that preceded them.

Perhaps there is a certain degree of concern that drives academics, in particular, to heavily identify with anti-racist discourses, because otherwise they risk being outed as insufficiently anti-racist. Do university programme leaders and directors of studies feel a sense of obligation to decolonise the curriculum as they fear offending racially minoritised[1] students and staff? As John McWhorter (2021) explains, people (referring to White people) have reached a crossroads where they feel they can no longer be complicit in knowing and acknowledging how racial inequality pervades the

landscape in HE (McWhorter, 2021, p. 6). In fact, they feel compelled to eradicate it from the ivory towers they inhabit and where they pro-actively exorcise those who do not share the same vision. Thus, the question arises: Should efforts to tackle racial inequality in UK HE be viewed as expressions of 'wokery', and therefore as signs of excessive sensitivity, or as legitimate attempts to address a real problem?

The purpose of this paper is to trace out a recent debate on the introduction of strategies to tackle racial inequality in the HE sector in the UK. This paper starts by briefly outlining how despite an increase in the diversity of staff and students in higher education, racial inequality continues to persist in terms of student attainment and staff progression, with evidence of elite universities continuing to breed inequality. In recent years, the UK government has moved from a position of advancing a policy for addressing racial inequality to explicitly encouraging universities to drop any efforts to tackle it, viewing such plans as a challenge to academic freedoms and free speech, or a step too far towards 'political correctness'. In spite of universities being duty-bound to promote equality of opportunity since the introduction of the Equality Act in 2010, there has been a rather poor record of translating policy into action. The introduction of Advance HE's Race Equality Charter (REC) is one tool at the disposal of universities to implement policy through equality frameworks and action plans. However, the RECs have shown a pattern of privileging intent over outcomes, and some academic circles suggesting that the RECs are in fact mechanisms by which universities put forward a blueprint for corporate values around the diversity and inclusivity agenda. Despite shortcomings in their implementation, universities awarded a REC Mark, together with their respective action plans, have a supplementary framework at their disposal to shape and maintain existing initiatives, without which the sector would be retracting on its commitment to diversifying its structures and being more inclusive.

Racial Inequality – an Enduring Problem

Even with HE becoming increasingly diverse in the UK, with undergraduates and postgraduates from Black (8 %), Asian (12 %) and mixed backgrounds (5 %) comprising a quarter of the student population (HESA, 2023) – a growth of 9 % since 2000 (Tatlow, 2015), inequalities continue to pervade the sector. These include discrepancies in the admission process to selective elite universities (Boliver, 2015), an attainment gap in degree classification, and exclusion and marginalisation in terms of student experience (Shilliam, 2015) to name a few. Racially minoritised academics also experience deep-seated inequality within HE that inhibits the recruitment, retention and career progression of racially diverse staff (McGowan & Felten, 2021; Singh & Kwhali, 2015). Despite staffing at higher education becoming more ethnically diverse (reaching 18.0 % in 2019/20), in general, inequalities persist among White, Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff, with lower numbers of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff than White staff on open-ended/permanent contracts (Arday, 2022a), in senior management positions, in professorial roles and on higher salary bands. In 2019/20, professors from Asian and Black backgrounds were at 4.3 % and 0.7 % respectively, compared with 11.2 % who were White (AdvanceHE, 2021). The narratives that shed light on these figures have been well documented in a voluminous body of literature describing questionable employment practices disadvantaging racially diverse staff, lack of career progression and a very palpable 'concrete ceiling' amongst others (Arday & Wilson, 2021; Mahony & Weiner, 2020).

Racism and Racial Inequality in Elite Universities

What has emerged in recent years in both the UK and the United States are assertions that some elite universities are places of left-leaning wokery with a propensity for political correctness (Bhopal & Myers, 2023). In their reflections for their research on elite universities exploring race and class, Bhopal and Myers (2023) found that at Harvard, Yale, Oxford and Cambridge, racially minoritised students had experienced overt racism, and in the U.S., Black students were frequently reminded they were beneficiaries of affirmative action. Feelings of inferiority were also present, as well as a sense of impostor syndrome – both in academic and social spaces (Bhopal & Myers, 2023). For racially minoritised academics at elite universities in the U.S. and UK, Bhopal (2022) discusses what their experiences have been like when being based in predominantly White universities including both subtle and overt racism, being overlooked for promotion, having a constant reminder that the elite space was a White space, and an assumption they would be interested in departmental equality roles (Bhopal, 2022). The recent experiences of both student and staff cohorts described by Bhopal continue to remain unresolved not only in select elite universities but within HE as a whole. The disparities for staff and students have not fallen away with time and are ever-present, with the UK government explicitly moving away from plans aimed at addressing inequality at universities.

Universities Resist UK Government Attempts to Drop Plans to Improve Race Equality

The UK government have rescinded their commitment from two decades earlier when putting universities under considerable pressure to address issues of racial equality, moreover seeming to vehemently discourage universities from tackling the issue head-on. In June 2022, the former UK Minister of State of Higher and Further Education the Rt. Hon. Michelle Donelan MP in a letter to vice-chancellors warned that there was an undercurrent of extremist narratives pervading HE, where students, staff and academics were unable to discuss and debate issues freely on campus, threatening to derail the academic freedoms and free speech universities. This threat to freedom of speech, Donelan claimed, challenged the very fabric of a modern and forward-facing society (Donelan, 2022). In her crusade to reset the mood-music, Donelan brought into question the very initiatives that have been recommended by sector-leading organisations, schemes aimed at benchmarking diversity, in particular the Race Equality Charter, operated by Advance HE, with Donelan asking universities to consider whether or not they should be joining such schemes. She argued that as autonomous organisations in the UK, it should be up to each higher education institute (HEI) whether they can address issues of racial inequality internally rather than joining external schemes; furthermore, she reinforced her call to UK universities whether membership of such schemes was conducive to establishing inclusive environments (Donelan, 2022).

Cognisant of the persistence of racial inequalities that have an impact on staff and students, responses from universities in England, represented by *Universities UK*, have been defiant arguing that the government has overstepped the mark by pressuring them to drop a scheme designed to improve equality in HE. Moreover, some have in fact restated their commitment to how external assurance schemes can play an important role in addressing issues of harassment and the degree awarding gap (Adams, 2022).

Equality Legislation, the Equality Act (2010) and Advance HE's Race Equality Charter (REC)

Equality legislation in the UK is predicated on the assumption that all people have equal opportunities, and is encompassed under the Equality Act of 2010, making HEIs duty-bound for all

to have access to public services, employment and promotional opportunities. Yet, what we have seen is that whilst universities are duty-bound to implement this legislation, historically they have not been able to tackle issues such as institutional racism, unlike other sectors. This has led to a rather poor view of equality policy and a deficit model in terms of translating policy into strategy for implementation (Singh & Kwhali, 2015).

Even though, at an institutional level, policies of eliminating racism and creating equality of opportunity have taken root throughout the sector, at the same time, they act as a habitual stumbling block and appear to have limited impact in a context beset by cultural and organisational institutional racism. Racially minoritised staff consistently face barriers in higher education from all forms of racism – overt and covert manifestations alike (Arday, 2022b). Since the Black Lives Matter Movement universities have spearheaded initiatives targeted at the decolonisation of the curriculum aimed at making the undergraduate experience more inclusive. However, strategies to convert such principles of racial equality targeted at staff recruitment, development and career progression have been patchy.

In 2022, with the rumblings from the UK government on the horizon about the threats to derail academic freedoms and free speech at universities, a month prior to Donelan's letter to vice-chancellors, the Chief Executive of Advance HE Alison Johns could see the debate unfolding around the claims of wokery. She offered her counterargument: "Work to tackle racism is complex and it is certainly not 'wokery'; there is no one size fits all because every university is different – and long may that be the case" (Johns, 2022). She explained that the REC is one tool at the disposal of universities to tackle racism, but in some circles is misconstrued or intentionally badged as a set of externally imposed rules that universities are under an obligation to comply with to satisfy the race equality agenda. Johns argued that the REC is a framework to help universities tackle racism and foster inclusion, and arguments around wokery are challenges to derail Advance HE's efforts, but are just that – threats, and they only serve to create further divisions creating both winners and losers (Johns, 2022). Claims about threats to academic freedom and free speech are precisely formulated to challenge the very foundation of equality legislation action plans, thinly disguised through the lens of so-called 'culture wars' over freedom of speech. Yet, they mainly serve as deflection tactics to prevent the implementation of efforts to challenge the systemic, organisational and cultural barriers that enable racial inequality to endure (Adams, 2022).

The Race Equality Charter (REC): Privileging *Intent* Over *Outcome*

Despite the REC being granted to successful universities as either 'bronze' or 'silver' awardees, it seems that the scheme's impacts are yet to be fully realised. Advance HE (2021) acknowledge that since the launch of the REC in 2016, there are institutions that have not seen a significant impact with indicators of change in terms of staff representation, career progression, promotion, and a reduction in the student attainment gap (Oloyede et al., 2021). Advance HE's REC review findings were also born out in a recent study by Campion and Clark using a mixed-methods approach assessing the impact of the REC in British universities (Campion & Clark, 2022). They found that the schemes tended to privilege *intent* over *outcome* with institutions receiving a REC award for demonstrating their potential or ability to enact initiatives, but tangible measures of impact were far more elusive. In their study, Campion and Clark found that in highly diverse institutions in London, the attainment gap had fallen faster for racially minoritised students. Yet, these were the very universities that had successfully gained a REC award and were already sector-leading in terms of student attainment (Campion & Clark, 2022). What Campion and Clark's study showed is that the

REC scheme is not sufficiently wired into the structures and systems within universities at a local level – therefore showing disappointing results for advocates of the REC. Critics of the REC, including Donelan, would argue that given their limited impacts, the RECs have partial use and have seen their heyday, and that maybe tackling racial inequality ought to be the preserve of the universities themselves.

Nevertheless, there is the potential for the REC to take root. If impact is confined to assessing indicators of change quantitatively such as an increase in staff representation or a decrease in the student attainment gap, then it will be a long time until it will be possible to detect measurable change. However, if the REC serves as a supplementary framework to shape and maintain existing race equality initiatives within universities, then it can add value to existing work. Campion and Clark (2022) for instance suggest that the REC can be an effective mechanism to capture insight into institutional racism. The REC can also be used as a platform to coordinate and endorse resources and initiatives by the sector regulator under the Office for Students and the Department for Education (Campion & Clark, 2022). As Campion and Clark (2022) indicate, the REC at the time of their study was awarded only to 17 universities and there were not any best practice models available to emulate success. In addition, as universities operate autonomously, and as Johns (2022) acknowledges, there is a no one-size-fits-all model for the REC to be implemented. Instead, the REC is merely a framework that can bolster race equality initiatives rather than a 'toolkit' for organisational and systemic change (Johns, 2022).

Jumping on the 'REC Bandwagon' as a Marketing Tactic

Sceptics of the REC argue that in many respects, the REC is a marketing tool that plays into the hands of a monetised higher education sector, with universities competing for students providing a formal narrative in which universities demonstrate their diversity credentials (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Bhopal and Pitkin (2020) argue that the REC exists in a policy framework of White privilege playing into the hands of a normative culture of Whiteness; it in fact does not challenge the dominant organisational culture of the HE sector and fails to address the systemic and environmental factors that disadvantage racially minoritised staff and students. Diversity at an international level in higher education enhances an HEI's reputation in attracting students paying overseas fees, which are almost three times that of UK-domiciled students (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Thus, being bestowed with a silver or bronze REC award may have tacit motives utilised for income generation by universities and are not always about inclusivity and representation of racially minoritised staff and students.

A vociferous critic of the REC, Arif Ahmed, has suggested that the REC has produced unintended side effects, despite the well-intentioned motives. He argues that by being awarded a silver or bronze REC award, as Bhopal has also indicated, universities have used this to advertise themselves to students, employees and funding bodies (Ahmed, 2022). His concern is that by submitting a REC action plan, universities are prescribing how its staff and students should have a collective understanding or shared vision of race or gender discrimination and how inequality should be addressed. Ahmed states that the action plans are in effect a blueprint for corporate values, and reek of censorship and indoctrination (Ahmed, 2022). Are the concerns raised by Ahmed overblown or should we be dismantling some of the processes of the REC? Without a stronger evidence base to support his argument, it would be damaging to overturn the REC. It is far better to continue to evaluate and reform. The principles of the REC are not objectionable, and we still await to see the long-term outcomes of the REC's action plans.

Conclusion

This paper considered whether efforts to tackle racial inequality in UK HE should be viewed as expressions of 'wokery', and therefore as signs of excessive sensitivity, or as legitimate attempts to address a real problem. As we have seen racial inequality in HE has not been on the retreat, but at the same time efforts to tackle it through equality legislation have also been deficient. The existence of equality frameworks and action plans to translate equality legislation into practicable measures have not been as efficacious as expected, and have been met with opposition from the UK government suggesting that such plans breed extremist 'wokery' narratives. Nevertheless, they are one of many mechanisms to set about challenging systemic racial inequality. Claims about the REC conditioning how universities should present themselves on the global market, teach programmes and deal with issues of racial inequality are overstated given the REC's reach has been seen only in a handful of British universities. To describe the equality frameworks and action plans as woke side-tracks what amounts to ongoing significant matters of concern in HE, whilst at the same time it must also be acknowledged that they cannot offer a complete solution to the problem.

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1. 'Racially minoritised' is a term coined by Gabriel (2016) to mitigate against lumping Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) people (Gabriel, 2016; Mahony & Weiner, 2020). I acknowledge there are conflicting views expressed around language used to describe racially minoritised researchers; however, I will be using the term "racially minoritised" in line with Gladstone et al. (2022), rather than BME or researchers of colour, to acknowledge that minoritisation occurs through social processes of power and oppression.